

Vocational Rehabilitation – (Veterans)

For people with disabilities

Agency Involved: *Department of Veterans Affairs*

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) administers all US government programs supporting veterans of the US military. It is the second largest agency in the federal government after the US Department of Defense. The VA's services include disability compensation, pension, education, home loans, life insurance, vocational rehabilitation, survivors' benefits, medical benefits, and burial benefits.

Administratively, the VA has 58 regional benefits offices which help manage and administer the benefits programs.

Summary

The **Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E)** Program helps veterans with service-connected disabilities to prepare for, find, and keep career-oriented jobs. The program is sometimes called the Chapter 31 program, based on the title of the federal law that created it.

The VR&E program offers the following services

- Evaluation of abilities, skills, and interests for employment
- Vocational counseling and planning
- Direct employment services such as job-training, job-seeking skills, and resume development.
- Assistance with job seeking and retention, including special employer incentives and job accommodations
- Coordination of On the Job Training (OJT), apprenticeships, and non-paid work experiences
- Post-secondary training at a college, vocational, technical or business school
- Independent living services

More details available at:

[The VA website](#)

[VA Listing of Regional Benefits Offices](#)

[The VA's Vocational Rehabilitation website](#)

Specific Benefits

Following the Entitlement Determination (see "Eligibility" below), an eligible veteran will meet with a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor (VRC) to develop a rehabilitation plan. This plan will specify an employment or independent living goal, identify a service track and intermediate goals, and outline which services and resources the VA will provide to assist in reaching the goals of the plan.

Service Tracks

The five vocational rehabilitation service tracks are:

- **Reemployment with Previous Employer** – for veterans who want to return to work with a former employer. This track may include help with work adjustment, job accommodations/modification, licensure, certification, and reemployment rights.
- **Direct Job Placement Services for New Employment (Rapid Access)** – for veterans who already have most of the skills they need for their chosen career and want to find a job as quickly as possible. This track may include help with short-term training, licensure, certifications, job readiness, resume development, job search, job accommodations, and post-employment follow up.
- **Self-Employment** – for veterans who feel self-employment is a better solution for them because of limited access to traditional employment, need for flexible work schedules, or need for an accommodating work environment because of their disability or other issues. This track may include help on market analysis, development of a business plan, training in small business management, and marketing and financial assistance.
- **Employment Through Long Term Services** – for veterans who choose a new career and need specialized training and/or education for that career. This track may include help with college, vocational or technical school, internships, job shadowing, work study, apprenticeships, and public-private job partnering.
- **Independent Living Services** – for veterans who decide they are not able to work because of their disability. This track may include help with independent living skills training, assistive technology, services at special rehabilitation facilities, and connection to community-based support services. The goal is to increase the likelihood the person can return to work someday.

Subsistence Allowance (Payment)

In some cases, when a veteran needs education or training to achieve his or her goal, the VA will pay a monthly subsistence allowance. The amount is based on the whether the training/education is full-time or part-time, the type of training or education, and the number of dependents the veteran has.

GI Bill

Although not a specific disability benefit, there are a variety of options for veterans which fund training and education under different GI Bill programs, including the Post-9/11 GI Bill, the Montgomery GI Bill, and the Veterans Retraining Assistance Program (Also called VOW to Hire Heroes).

Disabled Veterans Outreach Program

Although not a VA project, this program through the Dept. of Labor, is specifically for vets with disabilities. Within the One Stop / Workforce Development Centers (see other entry) there are DOL funds specialists who help vets, and within that group the DOL has specialists who serve veterans with disabilities. These Disabled Veterans Outreach Specialists help with case management and develop career and job training opportunities, and facilitate or provide assistance in job placement. (See the entry on Workforce Development for contact information)

More details available at:

[The VA's Vocational Rehabilitation webpage](#)

[The VA's GI Bill webpage](#)

Populations Served (eligibility)

The VA rates the significance of a disability on a percentage basis from 10% to 100%. The main purpose for this rating is determination of monthly compensation payments, if any, for service-related disabilities. But it is also used to set minimum eligibility standards for VA voc rehab services.

To be eligible for VA voc rehab services, a veteran must:

- Have been discharged ("other than dishonorably") within the last 12 years
 - Alternatively, have gotten a VA service-connected disability rating within the last 12 years, if this happened significantly after the discharge
 - If a medical condition prevents or interrupts the implementation of the voc rehab plan, the 12 year "clock" can be stopped during that period
- Have a service-connected disability rating of at least 10%
 - Alternatively, have a **Memorandum Rating** of at least 20%
 - A Memorandum rating is a temporary notice of the expected outcome of the official disability rating. It is usually conservative and the eventual disability rating is nearly always at least the same percentage as the memorandum rating and often more. But sometimes the disability rating takes more than a year. So this is a temporary backup for benefits purposes.
- Have an "Employment Handicap" – an impairment which effects the person's ability to work and which results "in substantial part" from the service-connected disability

In some cases, if the 12 year period is over or if the person's disability rating is not high enough, the voc rehab counselor may determine the person has a Significant Employment Handicap, but the precise definition of this term is vague. This determination is unlikely if the person has a disability rating below 20%.

People who served in the military reserve programs are only eligible for VA voc rehab benefits if they were injured while on active duty. People who served in the National Guard are not eligible.

More details available at:

[The VA's Vocational Rehabilitation webpage](#)

Definition of Disability

There are actually two different disability ratings systems involved with VA benefits determination – one from the Department of Defense (DOD) and one from the VA. Both use the same rating scale – the Veterans Affairs Schedule for Rating Disabilities (VASRD) – but apply it in slightly different ways. The VASRD rates the significance of a person's disability on a percentage scale from 0 – 100, in 10% increments.

- **DOD Disability Rating:** if a service member cannot perform his or her military duties because of a disability, the DOD will have its doctors review the situation, rate the degree of disability, and decide if the person should get a medical discharge. Anyone with a 30% disability rating or above will usually get a medical discharge.
 - The rating represents how significantly the disability impacted the person's military duties and career. It is used, along with the person's rank, to determine his or her DOD disability payments. It does not reflect employability or independent living skills.
 - The DOD disability rating is permanent and will not change through a person's lifetime, unless the person appeals it for some reason.
 - The DOD disability rating is based only on the disability that led to the person's review. If the person has other coexisting disabilities, they are usually not included in the rating.
- **VA Disability Rating** – In general, the VA will accept the DOD rating for eligibility for benefits. If a vet feels the DOD rating does not represent the full extent of his or her disability – for example, because of multiple disabilities, or because the disability has gotten worse – he or she can ask for a separate VA rating.
 - Usually a vet can only get financial compensation benefits from one or the other, DOD or VA, not both. But getting other VA benefits, such as vocational rehabilitation, will not impact DOD disability payments.
 - VA staff will base its disability rating on a review of medical records and exams.
 - VA reviewers do not add multiple disabilities "linearly" when rating their total impact. A person with, say, 40% disability from an amputation and 20% disability from a head injury will not have an overall 60% disability rating. The VA has a complex formula it uses to combine the effects of disabilities.
 - The VA rating represents how significantly the disabilities impact a person's participation in civilian life. So employability and independent living are factored.

- The VA rating is not permanent and may decrease or increase later in life, based on periodic VA review. If the person requests a later VA examination and review, and the VA decides his or her disability has improved, the rating may go down.

For both systems, the disability(ies) must be related to military service. If a disability is genetic, it must have been aggravated or accelerated by military service. However, there are a few exceptions, including disorders associated with specific service-related exposures, such as the Vietnam-era pesticide Agent Orange or the post-WWII-era atomic testing.

More details available at:

[Stateside Legal website on DOD vs. VA Disability Rating](#)

Criminal History

Having a criminal history does not impact a veteran's disability benefit, including vocational rehabilitation. Even if a veteran received an "other than honorable" discharge and served jail time for something which happened during his or her military service, as long as it was not a dishonorable discharge, the veteran is not excluded from benefits.

Substance Abuse

Substance abuse does not impact a veteran's disability benefit, including vocational rehabilitation. Even if a veteran received an "other than honorable" discharge and served jail time for drug offenses which happened during his or her military service, as long as it was not a dishonorable discharge, the veteran is not excluded from benefits.

Application Process

Most vets with a disability will have gotten a DOD disability rating (and possibly a VA disability rating if requested separately) when they left the military. If there is a delay in the disability determination, they will probably have gotten a temporary Memorandum Rating.

The VA has a website called the Veterans Affairs E-Benefits Online Application and Management (also called VONAPP). This provides access to the forms and application processes, and is the fastest way to apply for benefits like VA voc rehab or a new VA disability rating.

If a person is not able to use the online VONAPP service and wants to apply for a new VA disability rating, they would need to use VA Form 21-4138 - Statement In Support Of Claim and file it with the local VA benefits office. If they have a DOD/VA disability rating and want to apply for voc rehab benefits, they should use VONAPP or contact the local VA benefits office and request an interview.

At the initial interview, the voc rehab counselor will establish eligibility/entitlement and may conduct some initial assessments. The VA will make a final eligibility determination within 60 days of this meeting.

More details available at:

[The VA website](#)
[VA Listing of Regional Benefits Offices](#)

Insider Tips/Comments

- Get help from the Disabled American Veterans (DAV). This non-profit organization has a network of National Service Officers available to advise vets at no cost on how to navigate the VA benefits system. These officers are well trained and very helpful. Vets do not have to be members of the DAV to use their services.
- A vet should appeal any VA determinations they feel were not correct. The VA officially says its staff members make errors in just under 15% of all cases, but a 2009 review by the Inspector General's Office suggested the error rate is nearly 25%.
- In extreme situations, there are lawyers who specialize in handling VA appeals. You can find them through online searches.
- IF possible, the vet should bring a copy of his or her medical records to the first meeting with a VA voc rehab counselor. This will speed things up tremendously.

More details available at:

[Disabled American Veterans website](#)

[DAV National Service Office Locator](#)

[National Personnel Records Center](#)

Typical Timeline

- VA Voc Rehab staff will make an eligibility determination within 60 days of the intake meeting with a vet.
- The time it takes to get a person in a job varies tremendously, depending on the person's career choices and training needs. It must finish within 12 years of the person's military discharge (or when they first got their disability rating, whichever is later).
 - If a medical condition prevents or interrupts the implementation of the voc rehab plan, the 12 year "clock" can be stopped during that period.
- After placement in a job, the VA voc rehab counselor will monitor the person's status for 90 days, to make sure the job position is stable before closing the case.
 - If the person loses that job later on and cannot find another because of their disability, they can reapply for additional VA voc rehab services (within the 12 year window discussed above).

Contact Information

Regional or National:

- [Veterans Affairs Website](#)
- [Veterans Affairs E-Benefits Online Application and Management](#) (also called VONAPP)

State:

- [VA Listing of Regional Benefits Offices](#)
- [Missouri Regional Office \(St. Louis\)](#)

Web links for Independent research:

- [The VA's main website](#)
 - [VA's Fact Sheets on Specific Benefits Programs](#)
 - [VA's webpage on the VOW to Hire Heroes Act](#) (including voc rehab services extension and Seamless Transition resources)
 - [VA's online manual for Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Services](#)
 - [GI Bill options](#)
- [Disabled American Veterans website](#)
- [US Department of Defense TurboTap website on veterans disability resources](#)
- [Stateside Legal](#) (free legal advice for military families from a non-profit collaborative)
 - [Stateside Legal on DOD Disability Determination](#)
 - [Stateside Legal on VA Disability Determination](#)
- [My Army Benefits website](#) – Fact sheets and resources from the US Army
- [US Department of Labor's Veteran's Employment and Training Service \(VETS\)](#)

Produced by the Disability Policy & Studies office, School of Health Professions, University of Missouri
Phone 573 882-3807 <http://dps.missouri.edu> robertsc@health.missouri.edu

This publication was funded by the Missouri Department of Mental Health, Division of Behavioral Health contract #AOC13380075. Accuracy of the information contained in the document is the sole responsibility of the authors.

This publication was produced under the auspices of the Region 7 TACE Center at the University of Missouri, which is funded by a grant from the Department of Education. The contents do not necessarily represent the policies of the Department of Education, and users should not assume endorsement of the contents by the Federal Government.